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The Emergence of International Deaf Spaces in France from Desloges 1779 to the Paris Congress of 1900

Mike Gulliver

On the morning of August 6, 1900, more than four hundred Deaf¹ and hearing people, from places as far flung as Japan, Ecuador, the United States, Russia, and Mexico, descended on the Palais des Congrès for the Paris World Fair. Dressed formally and informally, female and male, signing and speaking, they milled about outside. As they greeted friends and visited the attractions of the Cours La Reine, we can imagine pockets of signed and spoken conversation ebbing and flowing into, across, and around each other.

For many of the French Deaf delegates, the day was one to savor. Deaf community picnics in Paris had drawn sizeable crowds in recent years, but the congress was an exceptionally large gathering. More than two hundred Deaf people from all over the world were drawn to the glittering pavilions of the 1900 World Fair. Most French Deaf people had come simply to be with other Deaf people and to enjoy being a community of visual people in an otherwise predominantly hearing world. Overseas attendance only strengthened that community experience, as did the universality of sign language, which allowed those familiar with different local and national sign languages to rapidly negotiate international communication.

1. A variety of terms are used for Deaf people in this chapter. In general discussion, I have used the modern form *Deaf*. Where I have translated historical terms from French, I have stayed close to the original, translating *sourd* as *deaf*, *muet* as *mute*, and distinguishing between *deaf-mute* (the closest nineteenth-century equivalent to *Deaf*) and the more objective *deaf and mute*. Where the French was capitalized, I have retained this. For a contemporary exploration of French terms used in the nineteenth century, see Berthier 1873, 200.

Some French Deaf people, however, had come with an explicitly political aim: to push for urgent change in national policy. Since the 1880s, the lives of France's hearing population had been transformed by sweeping aside church control of education and establishing a national system of free, obligatory schooling under the Ministry of Public Instruction. However, the Deaf community had been left under the Ministry of the Interior, the same institution that had been responsible for them since the French Revolution and that also oversaw hospices, almshouses, and lunatic asylums. This ministry saw Deaf people as requiring care, unable to act for themselves, and (powerlessly) represented by experts.

The French Deaf community planned to use the 1900 congress to engineer a transfer of their education to the Ministry of Public Instruction by mobilizing the weight of international Deaf opinion against the Ministry of the Interior. In addition, they also planned to offer the 1900 congress itself as evidence that the Ministry of the Interior did not understand the true nature of Deaf experience: although Deaf people might initially appear to be small marginalized groups living within separate states, the reality was that they formed a single, thriving, international community whose commonality of experience and ability to communicate across and between signed languages challenged the hegemony of a hearing world divided along linguistic and national boundaries. As one leader of the French Deaf community argued, "We are French, Italian, Austrian, American, English, German, etc. . . . United as a community . . . we know no borders, and have but one aim, to complete our social emancipation" (Congress 1900, 258).

The 1900 congress was set up to demonstrate the reality of that Deaf experience. Positioned in the most visible way, at the heart of the Paris World Fair, that international Deaf "reality" would be performed, a "Deaf space" welcoming any hearing person to watch, learn, and

realize that Deaf people, far from being isolated by deafness, were in fact the unrecognized heralds of an entirely different but equally valid international form of humanity.

In this chapter I identify the roots of that international Deaf reality in writings of the eighteenth century and chart its development through a century of increasingly international events that culminated in the 1900 congress. I explore the evolving ways in which Deaf people describe themselves through the nineteenth century and discuss why the French Deaf community selected a demonstration of Deaf internationalism to demand policy change. I conclude by looking at the 1900 congress in more detail and use the events of that congress to highlight the potentials and limitations of a Deaf internationalist reality.

<1>Positionality and History

<txt>I am a hearing researcher who focuses on Deaf history, mainly in France and the United Kingdom. Much historical work on the Deaf community—particularly on the French Deaf community—uses data collected and translated by others. Because I speak French, I utilize original French documents written by Deaf people themselves, published records of events such as the Paris banquets and international Deaf congresses, and Deaf magazines and newspapers. I own copies of all of the original material and have translated all of the quotes in this chapter myself. Of course, I cannot assume that what I write about Deaf history is accurate or that I have interpreted it correctly. I rely on my experience in making sense of these texts, and I offer a framework that helps us to form the historical data into particular stories.

<1>Deaf Internationalism: Spatial and Linguistic Roots

<txt>Deaf internationalism could be defined as the idea that Deaf people, all over the world, have enough in common that they recognize each other as more or less the same. In sign language, this might be described as <sc>DEAF DEAF SAME</SC> or <sc>DEAF, LIKE ME.</sc>

Although Deaf internationalism (what the editors call “deaf universalism” in the introduction of this book and Ladd calls “deaf globalism” in his chapter) is now being explored as part of modern, western Deaf community’s self-understanding, the idea is not new. Historical Deaf communities, particularly in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, had a very good understanding of their international connections.

Deaf people today live in a world that is very different from those historical worlds. Nowadays, it is hard to think about identity without envisioning what you *should* be, such as what nation you should be a citizen of, what language you should use, and even local identities such as what football team you should support. Most of these expectations developed in the nineteenth century; before that, people’s networks were much less about ‘should’s, and much more about ‘could’s: where you *could* work, where you *could* travel, and where others *could* understand you.

For Deaf people living in rural areas in the early nineteenth century, their networks were largely restricted to their immediate surroundings. A Deaf man, Jean Massieu, described his life in a rural part of France in the following words: “We were six deaf-mutes in our family. Three boys and three girls. . . . I expressed ideas by manual signs or by gestures. . . . Strangers didn’t understand us when we used signs with them, but our neighbors did” (quoted in Sicard 1808, 636).

Those close to Massieu, and others like him, found ways to meet him on his own visual terms. But others, further from him, were less forgivingly sound biased. We could call Massieu’s visual reality an early form of “Deaf space,” a way of living that experiences the world from a visual point of view. Deaf spaces emerge from Deaf people’s visual experience of the world. The concept of “Deaf space” moves us away from the idea that Deaf people are always a minority in

a hearing world toward realizing that the world is neither Deaf nor hearing but becomes Deaf or hearing as we live in it and shape it.

History is full of examples of Deaf people who, like Massieu, inhabited tiny Deaf spaces that allowed them to get by. However, it is also full of examples of Deaf people who lived close enough to others that they were able to connect their individual Deaf spaces to produce a larger shared Deaf space. Within that space, by interacting over a long period, they created and shared natural sign languages and, through them, developed other aspects of what we would now call *Deaf culture*.

One such community was located in Paris, a city which at the turn of the nineteenth century had a population of more than half a million. The Deaf community in Paris was at least two hundred strong by that time and was already well established before de l'Epée began teaching (Epée 1774, 8). The community was old enough to have developed a rich sign language and for other aspects of Deaf culture (such as name signing) to become standard. The community is described by one of its members, Pierre Desloges, who is known as the first French Deaf man to write and publish a book. He states that within the community, a Deaf person might “learn to perfect and combine signs . . . and through the commerce of his comrades, the [easy] art of painting and expressing all ideas, even those most independent of the senses, by means of natural signs” (Desloges 1779, 14).

Desloges's community is important because it is the first suggestion that Deaf people's natural sign language offered a way to communicate that gave their Deaf space a different “shape” from the space of the hearing world that surrounded them. This meant that although Deaf people remained involved in the hearing world, they experienced the Deaf community and

the shape of its interactive spaces as an *<i>alternative</i>* to hearing-world boundaries of language and country:

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They [Deaf people] have a natural language, which they use to communicate amongst themselves. This language is none other than the language of signs . . . among them, one is like a man transplanted suddenly into the midst of a foreign nation. (Desloges 1779, 7–8)

I have at my disposition a wealth of signs that I can combine, one with the other, in the blink of an eye. . . . A Deaf person from Peking, as well as a Deaf person from France would understand the object that I'm describing. (56–57)

<txt>Desloges's book was not specifically designed to argue this point so it would be inappropriate to read too much into it. However, this is clear evidence that—as early as the eighteenth century and in a Deaf community that had come about quite spontaneously (i.e., without being centred on a school or other form of structure that might have lent it an international network)—the idea that Deaf people are international in some form was already important.

Note that universality, as understood in the periods and places of this chapter, does not deny the existence of different local and national sign languages, but rather suggests that Deaf people are more able than hearing people to quickly construct mutually intelligible, visual communication. This is by no means the only Deaf shared experience and is part of the ideology of sign language, as other chapters in this book demonstrate.

<1>Deaf Internationalism: The Deaf Nation

<txt>We now look at the first explicitly political use of internationalism by the Deaf community in the mid-nineteenth century. Before we move on, however, it is helpful to discuss two examples that demonstrate the differences in the ways that Deaf people saw the hearing world and their own Deaf reality. These will also help us to fill in the gap between Desloges's writing in 1779 and texts from the mid-1900s.

Both the following examples are from the life of Laurent Clerc, a Deaf man who spent his formative years within the walls of the Parisian Deaf school originally founded by the Abbé de l'Epée. Clerc is the first Deaf Parisian that we know of to travel extensively, and both his life and his written words clearly show the fundamental reality of his membership in an international Deaf community. The first example is from a trip that Clerc took to London in 1815. He visited the London school for Deaf children, where he met some young English Deaf children. This is the description of his visit by the Paris Deaf school administrator:

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As soon as Clerc beheld them, his face lit up; he was as agitated as a traveller would be who, in regions far from home, suddenly chanced upon a colony of his own countrymen.

For their part, the hundred and fifty [English] deaf-mutes immediately recognised Clerc as one of their own. . . . Clerc approached them, he made some signs, and they responded with other signs. This unexpected communication was a cause for wondrous celebration for them. (Ladébat 1815, 170, 172)

<txt>

In 1818, Clerc was in the United States, where he had helped to establish the first American school for deaf children. This example is ostensibly about language but it also speaks about space. He explains in his own words how Deaf people's specific sensory situation and their consequential inability to acquire the spoken language of a particular people distances them from the spaces of the hearing world around them, while at the same time making them members of an international Deaf community:

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Nothing can replace their [deaf mute's] natural language (that is of signs). . . . This language, as simple as nature and which is capable of extending itself to describe all of nature has no boundaries other than that in the minds of men. It is universal; and deaf mutes from whatever country they come understand each other. . . . But, they cannot understand you. . . . You understand [don't you?] that the language of a particular people can never be the mother-language of the deaf mutes born in its midst. (Clerc 1818, 15, 18)

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By the time Clerc was writing these words in 1818, the Paris Deaf school where he had been a teacher was a well-established Deaf space. It had been founded in 1791 but then virtually abandoned by the state, which left Deaf children in the care of Deaf teachers. The combination of residential schooling, a protective and enclosed environment behind the school's high walls, and Deaf leadership of Deaf children was intoxicating. By the early 1800s, those coming into the school had started to comment on how much it looked like a "foreign country" with its own language, "laws," culture, and customs (Sicard 1803; Paulmier 1820). By the late 1810s, such a

rich sign language and culture had developed there that its residents had even begun to suggest the creation of a written form of sign language, *mimographie*, a first step toward establishing the Deaf space of the school as a standalone space, uncoupled from the educational policies of surrounding France.

When they learned of the *mimographie* project, however, the French government was horrified. They immediately replaced the school's management and introduced rules that not only forced the Deaf teachers to leave the premises as soon as they had finished teaching for the day but also separated new pupils from those already having learned to sign. The impact of this was a cruel partitioning of Deaf space.

The shape that Deaf space took was an annual banquet, held each year in November to celebrate the anniversary of the birth of the school's founder, the Abbé de l'Épée. Banquets were a traditional protest event in nineteenth-century France, and the Parisian deaf-mute banquets were no different. They were "reversed," carnivalesque events in which Deaf people became the majority, sign language the norm, hearing people the minority, and spoken French the "foreign" language. The events themselves were subscription-based, black-tie dinners that adhered to a standard format: a sumptuous meal followed by speeches and toasts (Graff, JSM, 25th November 1900: 175; Gulliver 2004). They quickly established themselves as a central feature on the Parisian Deaf calendar. The first, in 1834, attracted fifty guests. By 1845 there were eighty-five guests and by the mid-1850s there were nearly one hundred (see BHR entries for years 1834, 1845, 1855).

For the hearing world, the banquets were a curiosity, the first being covered by no fewer than eleven newspapers. Some carried stories that were plainly sensationalist, such as Maurice's report of the banquets' carnivalesque reversal of the majority-hearing/minority-deaf status, published in *Le Temps* on December 2nd, 1834.

Some, however, were more perceptive in their reporting. One example is Eugene de Monglave's article, published in *La Chronique de Paris* on December 8, 1834: "Last Sunday, the 30th November brought a curious sight. A banquet, the means by which deaf-mutes, ex-pupils of the Paris school, celebrated the one hundred and twenty second anniversary of the birth of the Abbé de l'Epée. . . . At five o'clock, nearly sixty members of this *distinct nation*, came together in the rooms of the restaurant in the Place du Châtelet." (Monglave 1834. italics mine)

The reference to "nation" here is fascinating. Perhaps the hearing author of the article was attempting to capture something of the same dynamic that motivated comments about the Parisian school spaces being "foreign." The foreignness, however, was not that of one hearing-world nation against another; rather, it was the foreignness of the "Deaf nation" compared to the hearing world. This is explored by a young Deaf man named Ryan, who was visiting Paris at the time of the 1835 banquet and invited to attend: "I am English . . . but I come to celebrate with you the memory of our father in common, the Abbé de l'Epée. This is where we see how much better our universal language is than those incomplete languages of speaking humanity, languages that are limited to a greater or lesser territory. Ours covers all nations whatever their particular languages may be—it covers the entire globe" (BSM 1842, 27–28).

Rather than being the exception, Ryan's internationalist understanding of Deaf space appears to have been the rule. The 1835 banquet account reports that "present were deaf-mutes from all countries; for it is a real advantage . . . to only have one language to learn, that is signing, a language that has no words and which, painting only true ideas, is necessarily the same across the whole surface of the globe" (BSM 1842, 19).

If mention of a language in common were not enough to underline the international nature of a Deaf community, then the 1838 statutes of the banquet's organizing committee make it clear that the banquets represented something of a focal point for a global reality:

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[The organizing committee's] principle aim is to deliberate upon the interests of Deaf-Mutes in general, to gather into a commonly united accord deaf-mute luminaries scattered across the surface of the earth and other learned men who have made a deep study of this speciality, to strengthen the ties that unite this great family, to offer to each of its members a rallying point, a place for reciprocal communication and the resources to make themselves known in the world (Société Centrale 1838).

In fact, the banquets themselves were demonstrable proof of an international Deaf reality. The first, in 1834, welcomed visitors from Prussia, Italy, and Portugal. The second welcomed Deaf people from the United States, Portugal, and Ireland. Thereafter, each year included at least one foreign representative; 1838 featured at least six: two from the United States, two from Prussia, and one each from Portugal and Ireland. The last of these was John O'Connell, British member of Parliament and son of the celebrated Irish nationalist Daniel O'Connell (BSM 1842, 61). O'Connell's attendance suggests that the idea of an international "Deaf nation" was not just fanciful language. The banquet committee *really did* think that they belonged to a community that was as fundamentally valid as a nation but international in form.

From approximately 1838, the word *nation* crops up repeatedly in Deaf writing. Unfortunately, for most of the wider world, the idea that Deaf people formed an international nation was meaningless. As one of the hearing Paris school teachers argued, if "deaf-mutes were,

as they like say, a *nation*, then we would see . . . deaf children learning the language [of signs] on their mothers' knees . . . but almost all are born to hearing mothers who have no knowledge of the language of signs. . . . Do not call yourselves a *nation* and distance yourselves from your hearing brethren" (Valade-Rémi, quoted in Palmarès 1855–56, 9, 19).

It was not just hearing people who struggled to see the value of the Deaf nation. Many Deaf people took the concept far too literally and assumed that it would take them away from a hearing French nation that contained their families, friends, homes, and jobs. When they learned that it was a metaphor for an international Deaf reality, they were bemused. Why waste time on a concept that was so idealistic when there was so much to be done to address the very real practical needs of an economically poor, local Deaf community? (see entry for 1844 in *Coup d'œil* document, reproduced in Bernard 1999, following p. 678)

From the 1840s onward, the French Deaf community gradually divided politically. For both sides, the ultimate goal was Deaf emancipation. However, one group believed this could be achieved only as an ideological shift, as the hearing world recognized the validity of Deaf people's extraordinary and unique international reality, while the other viewed ideology as less important than practical improvements to Deaf people's living conditions, employment prospects, and financial security. For the first group, full emancipation hinged on nothing less than the recognition of Deaf internationalist space. For the second, wasting time on an international reality was a luxury they could ill afford.

<1>Deaf Internationalism: The "Agency" of Deaf Space

<txt>Ongoing tensions within the French Deaf community continued from the 1840s until the early 1880s, a sad period in French Deaf history marked by growing gaps in the historical record as those responsible for the society publications found less to celebrate. By the

1860s, the banquets had declined until they were small celebrations aimed primarily at maintaining links with national and Parisian civic dignitaries. Sign language gave up its dominance at the banquets, and calls for the recognition of Deaf internationalism gave way to the recognition of civil rights (BSM 1864: 185). In 1865, only twenty guests attended, and none of them came from outside France (BHR entry for 1865: no page. Apparently, although Deaf space continued to offer the potential for internationalism, in the numbness of internal division, Deaf Parisians had forgotten that such an international reality was theirs.

In 1889, however, that international reality came crashing back into the consciousness of the Parisian Deaf community. This radical change was caused by the first international Deaf congress, an event which was utterly transformative but which—if the record is to be believed—was not originally international in vision. Between 1885 and 1886, the leaders of both opposing factions within the Parisian community died. As a result, the groups found themselves in a scrabble for territory, with neither gaining the upper hand.

Finally, in 1889, the centenaries of both the death of de l'Épée and the French Revolution and the year of the Parisian World Fair coincided to provide an opportunity, which the organization that had previously organised the November banquets seized enthusiastically. Drawing on every element of their banquets, the fame of de l'Épée, and their previous network of connections, they set up a week-long congress consisting of debates, historical visits, and social events, all leading to a final international Deaf-mute banquet (Congress 1889, 7). They invited “Deaf-mutes, in all parts of the world” (letter of February 1, 1889, in Congress 1889, 5).

The 1889 congress was international in that those attending came from overseas. This limited vision of Deaf internationalism failed to account for the spontaneous effect that bringing 179 people together from all over the world would have upon those present. Five German,

twenty-four American, eighteen British, eight Austrian, twenty-four Belgian, two Dutch, five Swedish and Norwegian, six Swiss, and two Turkish delegates joined more than eighty French delegates. Discussions covered most familiar subjects from the role of the Deaf community as the home of Deaf people (Congress 1889, 82) to the universality of sign language communication that allowed those present to overcome different national origins (Congress 1889, 83). Even those most committed to the congress's original, local, political aim could not help but be moved. In the words of Brill, one of the Austrian delegates:

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We Deaf-mutes are but one family. . . I find myself in a foreign country, surrounded by foreigners, and yet I find myself surrounded by friends and acquaintances whom I imagine to have known for years and breathe the air of my homeland. To what can I attribute this? It is the unique virtue of sign language that transforms a foreign country into a homeland. (Congress 1889, 86)

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The report demonstrates that Deaf internationalism in 1889 had “outgrown” earlier Deaf nation internationalism. Previously, it had been imagined more like a wheel, a series of Deaf spokes that connected the exclusively male alumni of the Paris school to Deaf people of similarly standing in either the New World (e.g., Laurent Clerc) or other European cities. The 1889 congress, on the other hand, uncovered a distribution that was far less centralized and far more diverse. It welcomed twenty-four female delegates and more foreign visitors than French delegates. America dominated the delegates, signalling a shift in focus of the Deaf world away from Paris as the global hub to one that spread across the globe like a net.

This new Deaf internationalism also appears to have accommodated greater variety and was experienced as something that Deaf people could participate in by choice, as they wished. Rather than focus on what made all Deaf people the same, their common gratitude to the Abbé de l'Epée (and by consequence, France) and his gift of sign language education was now less interesting than individuals' own personal experiences (Congress 1889, 87), how each local or national Deaf community's experience differed, and the extent to which those experiences aligned (or not) with each other and with the hearing members of their home nations. The core understanding remained that the Congress represented a unique space that was representative of a much greater "natural, and primordial" (Congress 1889, 29) Deaf reality, the ultimate destiny of Deaf people (86), authored through sign language, gifted to them through time spent with other Deaf people, and potentially transformative for the wider hearing world (83).

Another key to the 1889 congress Deaf space was the way in which participation in an international Deaf reality was itself transformative. The French delegates who originally planned it needed only to look at their own personal experience to see this. In the process of producing a Deaf space along with 178 others, they had been transformed.

The 1889 Congress turned Deaf people away from the issues that divided them toward the greater reality in which they were united. Therefore, in the wake of the 1889 congress, the French Deaf community began to think about how it might challenge its placement in the French asylum system and establish full citizenship within the hearing nation, and it was only logical that they should turn to a solution that reproduced that 1889 congress.

<1>The 1900 Congress

<txt>The solution that the Deaf community adopted was the Congress with which we began this chapter, positioned as centrally as possible at the heart of the 1900 Paris World Fair. It

would be a space produced by the Deaf community, unapologetically international and unavoidably transformative. In the opinion of a progressive member of the French government, Republican Paul Deschanel,

<ext>

it seems to me that the day when your great family . . . concentrates and converges all its efforts, all its designs, all of its wills upon a single point. That day, your strength will be increased one hundredfold, and no one will be able to act for you without your agreement. . . . Your voices will be heard and you will not only be those protected by the state, but those who collaborate with it. (JSM, August 12, 1896, 247, 248

<txt>

From 1896, the Deaf community began to make preparations for the Congress. Within days of writing an official letter of intent to the Paris World Fair organizational committee, however, they were already being undermined. The committee turned down their original request for a Deaf-only congress because any congress likely to debate the future of the Deaf community had to involve “hearing-speaking people” (Congress 1900, 300).

The obligation to involve hearing people in both its preparation and functioning was a serious blow. Three alternatives were debated. The first, to withdraw entirely from the world fair, was rejected on the grounds that the fair offered valuable public visibility. The second, to run the congress as a joint forum, was also rejected on the grounds that a combined Deaf and hearing meeting would be overshadowed by communication problems and could never generate the kind of clear demonstration of an international Deaf space that was desired. The final alternative was to run the congress with both Deaf and hearing participants but to structure it into two separate sections, which would debate separately, and then join together around a final plenary and vote.

In adopting the final alternative, French Deaf community leaders knew that the congress would become a battle fought over the key question, pitched with an international bias but really aimed at changing French national policy: “The organisation of deaf-mute education in different countries. Should institutions for the education of deaf-mutes be establishments for instruction, or welfare?” (Congress 1900, 310).

A vote for welfare would confirm the status quo, maintaining Deaf spaces under the control of the Ministry of the Interior, designated as marginal spaces of asylum. A vote for instruction, however, would trigger a cascade of changes that would oblige the government’s Ministry of Public Instruction to consult directly with Deaf people over how to recognize their alternative reality and represent it within the spaces of the state.

French Deaf community leaders failed to note, however, that although this debate format would provide an opportunity to produce an international Deaf space that would not only be produced alongside one that was strongly hearing but would continue to be beholden to the overarching permissions granted by the Paris World Fair organizational committee more generally. Without complete freedom, it was hard to see how the 1900 congress could truly represent the autonomy of an internationalist Deaf space. Instead, what became important was the simple question of numbers. Behind the scenes, the Deaf community (and their opponents in the Ministry of the Interior) began to plot to gain numerical advantage. As the congress opened on August 6, 1900, it appeared as if the Deaf community had won the initial battle. Deaf people and their allies outnumbered representatives of the Ministry of the Interior by nearly two to one.

As the opening speeches ended and the Deaf and hearing sections separated, however, the control of the world fair asserted itself. Deaf delegates found themselves ushered into a closed

room away from public sight. Then, as the Deaf delegates were still debating whether to crash the hearing delegates' meeting in the main hall, a representative from the Ministry of the Interior asked for permission to speak, suggesting that because the proposed question regarding the nature of Deaf education "necessarily involves discussion of matters of administration that are internal to specific countries and that are absolutely inadmissible in the context of an International Congress. . . . I would request that this question be removed" (Congress 1900b, 36–38).

After a short debate, which included no Deaf people at all, the question was withdrawn. The hearing delegates then refused to join in a final combined plenary and vote.

<1>Conclusion

The only really clear outcome of the 1900 Congress was a lingering stalemate over the reality of Deaf internationalism. The Ministry of the Interior succeeded in preserving the status quo, but they had done so by refusing to listen to the Deaf community and by ignoring the evidence that the Deaf community offered them. The Deaf community had demonstrated that Deaf people could come together from around the world, could communicate across sign language differences, and did—in the commonality of a visual experience of being—share something that united them at an international scale. That demonstration was of little use when those they really needed to convince—the hearing French state—perceived it only as a result of a shared experience of exclusion from the mainstream that was of no universal importance.

This story demonstrates the enormous significance that Deaf internationalist realities played in the nineteenth-century Deaf imagination. However, it also warns of how fragile those realities were in situations where Deaf internationalism was subject to interpretation by an uncomprehending hearing world. On a practical level, it was only too easy for the organizers of

the Paris world fair, and then the Ministry of the Interior, to inject hearing control into the 1900 congress Deaf space and then disarm it simply by refusing to acknowledge it. On a more political level, we are faced with the stunning sight of French officials ignoring the potential of Deaf people's internationalist reality, in order to secure and maintain parochial control on a purely national scale.

Perhaps the most shocking aspect of the 1900 congress is that, despite all of the evidence offered by the Deaf community and an explicit attempt by that community to mobilize an internationalist Deaf reality, the Ministry of the Interior was never really confronted with the need to understand Deaf internationalism. The state structures within which they conducted business allowed them to simply sidestep the issue. That something so central to the nineteenth-century Deaf experience (and the core focus of this book) could be dismissed so easily is chilling.

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